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AUTHOR Inderbitzen, Heidi M.; Clark, Maxine L.
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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is thought to be a relatively common experience among adolescents. Although no studies have specifically examined the relationship between adolescent loneliness and attributional style, research has found that children's attributions do affect interpersonal behaviors. The relationship between adolescent loneliness and perceptions of controllabiltiy and stability was studied in 99 male and 73 female ninth grade students. The students were tested as a group within their English classes. The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale was used to assess the students' levels of loneliness. The Adolescent Attribution Assessment Scale, designed for this study, was used to assess the students' attributional styles in terms of controllability and stability. Completion of these scales took approximately 75 minutes and required two class periods to finish. Data were analyzed by computing Pearson correlation coefficients. The results revealed a significant overall relationship between an individual's loneliness and his perceptions of controllabilty and stability with higher loneliness scores being related to perceptions of uncontrollability and stability. An important sex difference was also found. For males, loneliness was related to perceptions of uncontrollability but was not related to perceptions of stability. The data for females suggest a trend toward loneliness being related to perceptions of stability but not to perceptions of controllability. (NB)

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The Relationship Between Adolescent Loneliness and Perceptions of Controllability and Stability

Heidi M. Inderbitzen

Maxine L. Clark

Wake Forest University

ED269709

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Abstract

The relationship between adolescent loneliness and perceptions of controllability and stability was studied. Subjects were 172 ninth grade students (mean age = 14.7) recruited from the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District. Within this population there were ninety-nine males and seventy-three females. The students were tested as a group within their English classes. The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) was used to assess the students' levels of loneliness. The Adolescent Attribution Assessment Scale, designed for the present study, was used to assess the students' attributional styles in terms of controllability and stability. Completion of these scales took approximately seventy-five minutes and required two class periods to finish. Data were analyzed by computing Pearson correlation coefficients. The results reveal a significant overall relationship between an individual's loneliness and one's perceptions of controllability and stability with important sex differences.

The Relationship Between Adolescent Loneliness and Perceptions of Controllability and Stability

Past research has found that loneliness is a relatively common experience among adolescents. In fact, data from national surveys (Brennan, 1982; Ostrov & Offer, 1978) show that between twenty and fifty percent of all adolescents experience loneliness. These data not only verify the prevalence of loneliness but also indicate a need for interventions and treatments. However, before intervention programs can be adequately designed one must have some knowledge of the cause of loneliness.

Research analyzing the cause of loneliness in college students has found a significant relationship between an individual's attributional style and one's loneliness. Peplau, Russell and Heim (1979) found that when the cause of one's loneliness was perceived as being both internal and stable, an individual reported feeling depressed, hopeless, and helpless. Lonely people may also differ from nonlonely people in the nature of their attributional style. Data from Anderson, Horowitz, and French (1983) showed that lonely individuals ascribed interpersonal failure to permanent defects in themselves whereas nonlonely people ascribed such failures to changeable behavioral factors. Finally, Cutrona (1982) reported finding the initial attributions of students who remained lonely over a school year

as more internal and stable than were the initial attributions of students who overcame their loneliness.

Although no studies have looked specifically at the relationship between adolescent loneliness and attributional style, several researchers have found that children's attributions do effect interpersonal behaviors. Goetz and Dweck (1980) assessed attributions via a hypothetical situations questionnaire and then analyzed actual interaction styles via a pen-pal story. They found that those children who gave up entirely or who failed to alter a second message in order to be accepted into a club were those that emphasized incompetence as the cause of rejection regardless of their actual popularity. These results indicate that children do make differential attributions concerning interpersonal outcomes and that such attributions do influence subsequent behavior.

The above results suggest that loneliness in adolescence, an interpersonal problem, may also be affected by causal attributions. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to assess the relationship between adolescents loneliness and their perceptions of controllability (i.e., how much control they believe they have over the cause of a certain outcome) and stability (i.e., how changeable they believe the cause of a certain situation is) in terms of attributions.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 172 ninth grade students (mean age = 14.7) recruited from the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District. Within this population there were ninety-nine males and seventy-three females.

Measures

Loneliness. The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) was used to assess the student's levels of loneliness. This scale consists of twenty items of which half reflect satisfaction with social relationships (e.g., I feel a part of a group of friends and I am an outgoing person) and half reflect dissatisfaction (e.g., I lack companionship and I feel left out). Subjects are asked to agree or disagree along a four point continuum. This scale has been shown to have high internal consistency (alpha coefficient of .94), concurrent validity, and discriminant validity (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale was scored in such a way that high scores reflect a high degree of loneliness.

Attributions. The Adolescent Attribution Assessment Scale, designed for the present study, was used to assess the student's attributional style in terms of controllability and stability. This scale consists of sixteen hypothetical situations of which one half represent interpersonal situations, and the remainder

noninterpersonal situations. Each statement is further represented as a failure or a success in terms of outcomes. Examples of interpersonal situations, success and failure respectively, are: "You have just attended a party where you did not know very many people but were able to make many new friends. Why were you able to make new friends easily at this party?" and "All of your friends have a date for the homecoming dance except you. Why do you think that you do not have a date?" Examples of noninterpersonal situations, success and failure respectively, are: "You have just tried out for a sports team and made first string. Why do you think you made first string?" and "You just got a math test back and failed. Why do you think you failed?"

The students were asked to imagine themselves in each situation and to give a likely reason for the outcome of that situation. They were then asked to rate that reason in terms of controllability and stability. For example, if in response to the question "Why do you not have a date" a student wrote "Because I am shy," he/she would then be asked to rate how much control he/she had over this shyness and to rate how changeable he/she believed thie shyness to be.

This scale was scored in such a way that student's received an overall controllability score (high scores reflect the perception that one does not have much control over the cause he/she wrote down) and an overall stability score (high scores relfect the

perception that the cause he/she wrote down is variable and changeable rather than stable). Each student also received a controllability and stability score for both noninterpersonal and interpersonal situations.

Analysis of the pilot data showed that this scale has a test-retest reliability for overall controllability of .90 and for overall stability of .73. Further, this scale was also found to have relatively high internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of .83 for controllability and an alpha coefficient of .67 for stability.

Procedure

The students were tested as a group within their English classes. Prior to the completion of each scale the experimenter gave instructions regarding the appropriate way in which to complete that scale. The students were then allowed to complete the questionnaires at their own pace.

Results

Analyses using Pearson correlations revealed a significant overall relationship between an individual's loneliness and one's perceptions of controllability and stability (see Table 1). Specifically, higher loneliness scores are related to perceptions of uncontrollability and stability. When interpersonal and noninterpersonal situations were analyzed separately the relationship between uncontrollability and loneliness held for

both types of situations. However, the relationship between stability and loneliness held true only for interpersonal situations.

Further analyses revealed a significant sex difference. For males, loneliness was related to one's perceptions of uncontrollability both in interpersonal and noninterpersonal situations. However, loneliness was not related to perceptions of stability in either noninterpersonal or interpersonal situations for males. Females, on the other hand, appeared to have the exact opposite pattern of relationship between loneliness and perceptions of controllability and stability. Although none of the correlations between loneliness and controllability or stability are statistically significant for females, there are certain trends present. The data clearly suggest a trend toward female loneliness being related to perceptions of stability in both interpersonal and noninterpersonal situations while not being related to perceptions of controllability at all.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study show that there is a relationship between adolescent's loneliness and their perceptions of controllability and stability. In the past, researchers have primarily focused on social skills training as a way to resolve social problems such as isolation (i.e., Oden & Asher, 1977). And, although isolation is not equivalent to

loneliness, it may predispose one to loneliness. Thus, many researchers (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982) have suggested that social skills training may be the way to treat loneliness. The results of this study suggest, however, that one's attributions also effect one's loneliness. Therefore, it seems that any intervention program for treating loneliness should also include some cognitive therapy, perhaps in the form of attribution retraining.

The sex difference that appears in these results are especially intriguing in that past research has not reported such gender differences. It is possible that the current results are due to some sampling bias and, thus, further research is necessary for replication purposes. However, it is just as possible that such sex differences do exist. Perhaps male adolescents have a greater desire or need for control than do females and thus, perceptions of uncontrollability may be more distressing for males. Whatever the answer, these results certainly suggest the need for further research in regard to adolescent loneliness and attributions.

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Table 1

Correlations Between Loneliness and Perceived Controllability and Stability

	Males (n=99)	Females (n=83)	All Subjects (n=172)
Controllability	.36***	-.05	.22**
Stability	-.08	-.17	-.12*
Interpersonal Controllability	.28**	-.03	.15*
Interpersonal Stability	-.09	-.17	-.13*
Noninterpersonal Controllability	.37***	-.05	.21**
Noninterpersonal Stability	-.05	-.15	-.10

***p < .001

** p < .01

* p ≤ .05